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# A Message to Marcos

## Reagan sends a personal envoy to 'kick backsides.'

**T**he message had been in the works for more than a month, and the messenger had been fully briefed. Frustrated by a lack of reform in the Philippines, Ronald Reagan last week dispatched his friend and re-election-campaign chairman, Sen. Paul Laxalt, to Manila with what one U.S. official described as "the bluntest presidential message ever delivered" to an ally.

Laxalt's mission, said one insider, was to "kick backsides and take names." Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos had rebuffed all earlier emissaries, casting the U.S. government as a "hydra-headed monster" so tangled with friends and enemies he couldn't tell which was which. Laxalt's mission was to disabuse him of this notion. He handed Marcos a personal letter from the U.S. president. According to sources in Manila, Reagan wrote that he was "alarmed and concerned" over the "growing Red threat" posed by the New People's Army guerrillas. During two meetings Laxalt bearded Marcos on the danger of the NPA insurgency and stressed the breakdown of law and order throughout the Philippines. He pointed to the fatal shooting last month of 27 anti-Marcos demonstrators on the island of Negros and the murder of 14 Philippine journalists this year. And he stressed that fair and open balloting was "the main way to defuse tension."

**Do It Now:** Laxalt's message, said one White House aide, was "exceptionally blunt and unpleasant." Publicly, Marcos said Washington had not set out "to intervene in the internal affairs of the Philippine government." Privately, however, Philippine officials insisted that was precisely what Washington wanted to do. According to one aide, "When the Americans speak of the importance of filling the vice presidency or the urgent need to restore political normalcy, it only makes sense if they want it to happen sooner rather than later." The question was whether Marcos would listen, and when Laxalt returned late last week, it appeared that he had not. Throughout the meetings, sources reported, Marcos seemed unrepentant, defending himself against U.S. charges that he insisted were spurious. And privately, U.S. officials acknowledged that he had made no promises of reform.

It wasn't the first time the Philippine president had seemed to stonewall his U.S. allies. Last May CIA Director William Casey, another outspoken Reagan friend, delivered similar advice. Among other things, Casey suggested that quick political reform would divert support from the insurgency and help re-establish the kind of atmosphere required to rescue the Philippines' foundering economy. Perhaps in response, Marcos briefly flirted with the idea of holding an early presidential election, but

he now appears to have tabled the notion.

Laxalt's updated message, said one State Department official, was that "we want to see significant reform. If we don't, the economy will continue to worsen, the insurgency will grow, the well-being of the Philippine people will be in increasing jeopardy and, not just incidentally, U.S. interests will not be well served." According to insiders, Laxalt had spent a month being briefed by the State and Defense departments and the White House. His mission: to press for political, military and economic reforms.



A kiss from the First Lady: No backing away

In politics, U.S. officials hope the Marcos government will allow a fair counting of ballots in important municipal and provincial elections scheduled for next May. The State Department says the legislative elections held last year were as honest as any the Philippines has held since 1946, but critics point out that Marcos subsequently packed the Commission on Elections with well-known loyalists and removed accreditation from a citizen's commission that helped ensure relatively clean elections in 1984.

Laxalt's brief also called for stressing the need for greater professionalism among the Philippine armed forces. American officials have long complained that low morale over corruption and politically motivated promotions has stunted the counterinsurgency effort. Although Marcos dismissed U.S. concern, last week there were warnings that the guerrilla movement was growing more rapidly than anyone had suspected. "The

problem has to be attacked now," said Paul Wolfowitz, assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs, "or within three to five years we could have what in communist lingo is strategic stalemate, where basically their military strength is equal to the government's."

The administration was also eager to convey its opposition to the reinstatement of Gen. Fabian Ver, the armed forces chief of staff who took an indefinite leave of absence after being implicated in the 1983 assassination of opposition leader Benigno Aquino. U.S. officials, encouraged by the modest reform efforts of Ver's stand-in, Lt. Gen. Fidel Ramos, fear that Army morale will dip even deeper if Ver is allowed to return. According to Philippine sources, Laxalt stressed that Washington was "keenly awaiting" the results of the Aquino murder trial, in which Ver and 24 other armed forces personnel are codefendants. Last month a Philippine Supreme Court ruling threw out most of the evidence against Ver, leading his opponents to conclude that justice would never be done.

**Power Base:** In the area of economics, Laxalt's assignment was to attack one of Marcos's chief power bases by demanding an end to "crony capitalism," the political monopolies that dominate the coconut, sugar and other large industries in the Philippines. He may also have raised the issue of corruption. Since August Marcos's political foes have been circulating documents and videotapes purporting to show that the president, his wife and political allies have stashed tens of millions of dollars in U.S. real-estate investments, a charge denied by the Marcoses. Above all, U.S. officials stress that to revive the economy, Marcos must restore confidence in the nation's political and financial integrity. As things now stand, the Philippine economy is expected to shrink by as much as 3.5 percent this year after a 5.5 percent decline in 1984.

Laxalt's bottom line, says one administration official, was that "Marcos still has the ability to save the situation, but something has to be done by early next year." While recognizing that it must distance itself politically from the 20-year-old Marcos regime, the administration is deeply concerned about the future of vital U.S. naval and air bases in the Philippines and unwilling to impose sanctions that might hasten the political and military collapse it fears.

Everyone hoped Laxalt's visit would lead to meaningful reform. But if Marcos follows past precedent, he will probably give ground only grudgingly. For now, Washington has no other plan to deal with the emerging Pacific disaster. But unless Marcos can be prodded—or removed—the Philippines could well become America's next Iran.

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